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"What does well-being mean to me?" Conceptualisations of well-being in Irish primary schooling

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study is to understand the meaning of the term well-being as conceptualised by parents, grandparents, principals and teachers in the Irish primary education system.

Design/methodology/approach – A hermeneutic phenomenological approach was adopted to understand the nature and meaning of the phenomenon of well-being. Interviews were carried out with 54 principals, teachers, parents and grandparents from a representative sample of primary schools in Ireland. Each participant was asked the same, open, question: "What does well-being mean to you?" Responses were transcribed verbatim and analysed using a combination of the principles of the hermeneutic circle and Braun and Clarke's framework for thematic analysis.

Findings – Three conceptualisations of well-being were identified (1) well-being is about being happy, (2) well-being is about being healthy and safe and (3) well-being is something you "do".

Originality/value – To the best of our knowledge this paper is the first of its kind to describe how well-being is conceptualised by adults in Irish primary school contexts. In particular it highlights how neoliberal conceptualisations of well-being as a "thing", a commodity exchanged on assumptions of individualism, moralism and bio-economism, have crept into the education of our youngest citizens.

Keywords Well-being, Wellbeing, School, Mental health, Curriculum, Teachers, Parents, Grandparents, Principals

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Well-being is now a substantive component of the Irish school curriculum. Revisions to the Primary Curriculum Framework (Department of Education, 2023) mean that, as of 2025, 10% of a primary school child's (aged 4–12) school week will be devoted to well-being. At secondary level, 20% of a Junior Cycle student's (aged 12–16) curricular time is spent engaging in well-being–related activities (Department of Education and Skills and National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2017). This trend towards well-being comprising a significant proportion of curricular time looks set to continue with the forthcoming reform of the Senior Cycle curriculum (aged 16–18). Central to each of these curricular shifts is the belief that "our education system is key to equipping children and young people with the knowledge, skills and competencies to deal with the challenges that impact on their wellbeing" (Department of Education and Skills, 2019, p. 5). This belief has resulted in a shift from well-being as a component of a number of curricular subjects (e.g. Social Personal and Health Education) to well-being occupying at least 10% of curricular time in its own right. While there is no doubt that this increasing recognition of the need to support the well-being

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of children is a positive development, however, questions remain as to how schools can best promote well-being, if they are the best placed to do so, and what exactly is the meaning of this concept that occupies such a prominent position in our education system? It is this latter question that this paper seeks to address.

The mental health and well-being of children has become increasingly represented in national discussions about education in Ireland. Teachers and school leaders have highlighted the levels distress experienced by children in their schools and have called for greater attention and for these children, their teachers and families. For example, the Irish National Teachers Organisation (INTO), the largest primary teacher union in Ireland, suggests that:

> Primary teachers are profoundly aware of the importance of the wellbeing of their pupils. The challenge of protecting the mental health and wellbeing of primary school children must not be underestimated (Irish National Teachers' Organisation, 2022).

This profound awareness reflects the care and concern teachers hold for their pupils but also the increased presence of mental health concepts and language in our education system. This increase has not gone unnoticed or uncritiqued. Timimi and Timimi (2022), for example, suggest that the increasing awareness of mental health and mental disorder in schools has in itself led to the increased number of students thought to have mental health problems requiring professional intervention. They go so far as to propose that "rather than preventing mental health problems, it is likely that this ideology, and the resulting practices it encourages, are creating them" (Timimi and Timimi, 2022, p. 13).

Well-being too has been subject to critical attention. In a recent article, one of the authors (EF) described how the introduction of well-being into the Junior Cycle curriculum in Ireland was more a bargaining chip between warring teacher unions and education officials than a carefully planned curricular reform (Farrell and Mahon, 2022). Furthermore, the authors question the effectiveness of a curricular approach to well-being, suggesting that the relationship between teacher and student, rather than the content of the curriculum, holds the greatest potential for student mental health and well-being (Farrell and Mahon, 2022).

The political nature of well-being in schools can further be seen in the preponderance of diverse approaches to its promotion – each of which focuses, to greater or lesser degrees, on the individual and/or the wider interpersonal, economic, political and social environment in which that individual exists. These approaches include, amongst others, psychosocial approaches (e.g. Barrett, 2004), critical pedagogical approaches (e.g. Freire, 1970; Freire, 1994), welfare approaches (e.g. Allardt, 1976a; Allardt, 1976b), positive psychology approaches (e.g. Seligman *et al.*, 2009) and capabilities approaches (e.g. Sen, 1980, 1983, 1985).

Indeed, even the very onus on schools to promote the mental health and well-being of its pupils has consistently been called into question (Ecclestone and Hayes, 2009a, b; Craig, 2009). Many would argue, as former UK schools minister Robin Walker put it, that the "burden" of responsibility should not "fall on teachers or leaders to address what are, fundamentally, health problems" (Martin, 2023). This reference to mental health and well-being as "health problems" (as opposed to "education problems") offers a helpful insight into just how illusive and divisive the concepts can be.

Well-being is a decidedly nebulous concept. It is a cultural construct and, as a result, a composite of constantly shifting meanings, assumptions and understandings. There is even a lack of consensus around its spelling – wellbeing, well-being or well being – which further highlights the term's ontological instability. When tasked with analysing the meaning and function of the term well-being across the UK's Department of Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) public reports and documents and internal and external communications, Ereaut and Whiting (2008) found five different conceptual understandings or "discourses" of well-being: (1) an operationalised discourse of well-being as outcomes and indicators; (2) what was then

"a (very) new discourse of sustainability"; (3) a discourse of holism; (4) echoes of a philosophical discourse, as well as; (5) contemporary medical discourse (Ereaut and Whiting, 2008, p. 10). They described well-being as "a cultural mirage" (Ereaut and Whiting, 2008, p. 5) and highlighted the implications of "different groups constructing meaning in ways that make sense to them – and in ways that enable their own processes and objectives" (Ereaut and Whiting, 2008, p. 17). The UK's Department of Children, Schools and Families is not alone in its diverse constructions and uses of well-being, with private industry (Dale and Burrell, 2013) and the media (Sointu, 2005) offering similarly diverse, and sometimes conflicting, conceptualisations. The instability of the concept of well-being makes it vulnerable to wide and varying appropriation.

Ireland's Department of Education and Skills (2019) seeks to envelop this instability by referring to the "multi-dimensional nature" (p. 10) of well-being. The Department suggests that well-being "is comprised of many interrelated aspects including being active, responsible, connected, resilient, appreciated, respected and aware" (Department of Education and Skills, 2019; Department of Education and Skills and National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2017).

In light of the increasing curricular import of well-being, as well as critiques of its role in education and concerns about its conceptual instability, this study sought to understand how primary school teachers, principals, parents and grandparents conceptualise the term well-being.

Methodology

Research design

A hermeneutic phenomenological research design was adopted to illuminate the conceptualisations of well-being in Irish primary schools. Phenomenology, from the Greek *phainómenon*, meaning "thing appearing to view", showing itself, or flaring up, aims to understand phenomena, or "things", as they appear to others (van Manen, 1990; Harman, 2007). The great strength of such a design in its capacity to bring concepts, words or experiences which have, as Heidegger puts it, "faded" (2010, p. 26) in terms of their meaning, back into full clarity under the phenomenological gaze.

> . . . the fading of meaningfulness. It is not a disappearing but a fading, i.e. a transition into the stage and into the mode of non-primordiality where the genuineness of the enactment and beforehand the renewal of the enactment are lacking, where even the relations wear themselves out and where merely the content that itself is no longer primordially had "is of interest." Fading has nothing to do with "losing something from memory," "forgetting" or with "no longer finding any interest in." The content of factical life experience falls away from the existence relation towards other contents: that which falls away remains available; the available itself can, however, for its part fade as sense character of the relation and pass into that of mere usability. [. . .] i.e. they have fallen away from the primordial existence relation. Heidegger (2010, p. 26)

The very purpose of a hermeneutic phenomenological design is to bring back that which has faded or passed into mere usability. It provides an opportunity to examine, in full colour and attention, a concept we name and use all the time but whose meaning may have long fallen away. A concept upon which we have built something so tacit as a school curriculum. In focusing on conceptualisation, this study seeks to draw forth associations, words, assumptions and examples that come to mind for adults in a school environment when asked to describe the meaning or form of the term well-being.

Recruitment and participants

This study was conducted as part of the Children's School Lives (CSL) study – a national longitudinal cohort study of primary schooling in Ireland. Launched in 2018, the study

follows almost 4,000 children, across 189 schools, as they journey into, through and out of their primary school years (Devine *et al.*, 2020). The study is funded by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and received ethical approval from the University College Dublin Research Ethics Committee. A representative sample of schools was randomly generated using a national register, and schools were contacted and invited to participate in the study. All participants were offered clear and informed consent – including the unequivocal right to non-participation.

Of the 189 primary schools in the study, 13 were invited to participate as case study schools. These schools included a representative sample of DEIS (schools in communities identified as disadvantaged and participating in "Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools" programme) and non-DEIS schools, urban and rural, single sex and mixed, and all the major denominational and multidenominational patronages within the Irish education system (Catholic, Church of Ireland, Community National Schools and Educate Together Schools). In line with its hermeneutic phenomenological approach, and rally cry of "*zu den sachen selbest!*", or "to the things themselves!" (Husserl, 1965, p. 116), this study focused on the phenomenon at hand (conceptualisations of well-wellbeing) as it is described by this representative sample rather than on sub-dividing conceptualisations by variables such as gender, denomination or socio-economic status. The case study schools offered researchers the opportunity to explore, in-depth, the experiences of primary school children, teachers, principals, parents and grandparents. Researchers spent 2 weeks at a time in each of the 13 schools, immersing themselves in the day-to-day routines and activities of the classrooms and conducting a range of interviews and age-appropriate research activities with consenting participants. As the developmental maturity required to describe how one conceptualises something as abstract as well-being was deemed beyond the abilities of the two cohorts of children, aged 4/5 and 7/8 at the time of the study, just the adults, and not the young children, in the sample were included as outlined in Table 1. Participants did, however, include parents and grandparents from the same families which, combined with the teacher and principal perspectives, offered rich and generationally-diverse conceptualisations of well-being. Case study schools were assigned pseudonyms of well-known Irish lighthouses in order to protect their anonymity.

Data generation

Interviews were carried out by experienced post-doctoral researchers with specialist expertise in qualitative research. Each researcher was assigned a number of schools, and by virtue of spending two weeks in each school community, was afforded the opportunity to build and foster relationships with participants. Interviews were predominantly conducted in the school itself – in classrooms, staffrooms, offices or, sometimes, corridors or other quiet corners – although a number of parent and grandparent interviews were carried out in the home. The foremost priority in scheduling the interviews was the convivence and comfort of the participants which meant that some families were represented by both parents, others by one parent. In some families, a number of grandparents were able to contribute, while in others there were no living grandparents. The majority of interviews were carried out without the child being present yet, in one or two instances, the child was at home or waiting for their parent to take them home. These diversity of conditions represent the pleasant realities of conducting immersive qualitative research in family and school communities.

Table 1.
Study sample

Principals	Teachers	Parents	Grandparents	Total
12	14	21	7	54

Source(s): Author's own creation/work

The question that formed the basis this study of conceptualisation of well-being in primary schools was one of a schedule of ten open-ended questions posed to adult participants in the Children's School Lives Study. Each participant was asked exactly the same question: What does well-being mean to you? This question was carefully worded so as not to guide a response in a particular direction and many participants asked for clarification: "Well-being? For me or for the children?" (Teacher, Ardnakinna). The open nature of the question allowed participants to take their response in the direction that most readily came to mind which, in itself, offered an insight into their immediate associations and conceptualisations of well-being. Some participants chose to describe what well-being meant to them in terms of their role as a principal, teacher, parent or grandparent. Others focused on what well-being meant to them as individuals. A third group focused on well-being activities, while many incorporated aspects of all of the above in their response to this open question.

Data analysis

Interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim and the relevant sections, relating to the question "what does well-being mean to you?", analysed using a combination of the principles of the hermeneutic circle of interpretation (Heidegger, 1927/1996; Gadamer, 1960/1989) and Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework for thematic analysis. The hermeneutic circle is based on the idea that understanding the meaning of a text as a whole involves making sense of the parts, and grasping the meaning of the parts depends on having some sense of the whole (Schwandt, 2007). As such, interpretive understanding goes forward in stages with continual movement between the parts and the whole allowing understanding to be enlarged and deepened.

The hermeneutic circle, by its very circular nature, suggests that the meaning of a text is not something that can grasped once and for all. Meaning exists in a complex interplay between parts and whole. Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step process of data analysis provided a flexible framework for analysing the "parts" as well as the "whole" of the text (Figure 1). It is a framework that enjoys "theoretical freedom" (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 5) in that it is applicable across a range of epistemological and theoretical approaches without impeding on the particular values of an approach such as hermeneutic phenomenology. As Braun and Clarke (2006) themselves acknowledge, "one of the benefits of thematic analysis is its flexibility" (p. 4).

The first step in thematic analysis was to become familiar with the data which, in this case, involved checking the transcript against the original recording and the carefully reading and rereading the transcript to become (re)familiarised with its content. Step two involved generating initial codes with were descriptive labels and jottings – mainly picking out key words used by the participants. Step 3 involved searching for themes, taking the initial codes and sorting them into potential themes. For example, codes such as "happy" and "content" were tentatively sorted into the theme of "happiness/affect". At this stage codes were neither decided nor discarded. Step four offered an opportunity to review and refine these tentative themes with the "validity" of the prospective themes considered in terms of how accurately they reflected the meanings in the data. Step five involved further refinement and definition of the themes and isolation of the discourses relating to well-being. Quotes across the dataset, relating to each theme or discourse, were compiled at this, fifth, stage. The sixth and final step involved the final analysis of the data as a "whole" and writing up the discourses as presented below.

Results

Three discrete conceptualisations of well-being were identified: well-being as happiness, well-being health and safety and well-being as something one does.

Whole
Step 1: Familiarise yourself with the data
Step 2: Generate initial codes
Step 6: Produce the report

Parts
Step 3: Search for themes
Step 4: Review themes
Step 5: Define and name themes

Source(s): Author's own creation/work

Figure 1. Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step method of thematic analysis as aligned with the hermeneutic circle

Well-being is about being happy

The most frequent association drawn forth by participants was the association of well-being and happiness. The word cloud below (Figure 2) provides a visual representation of every word in the dataset relating to positive affective states with the size of the word reflecting the frequency with which it appeared in the dataset.

> To me it means that the children in my class are happy.
>
> Teacher, Ballagh

> That they are happy.
>
> Grandparent, Ardnakinna

Source(s): Author's own creation/work

Figure 2. Word cloud depicting positive affective states described by participants in this study

> I suppose what it means is that when children come to school, or when people come to work, they should come to a place that they are comfortable in, that they are . . . well, happy
>
> Principal, Tory

> I suppose it's your mental and emotional state, how you're feeling, what you can do to increase the happiness.
>
> Parent 1, Cashla

In addition to happiness, other positive affective states featured prominently in conceptualisations of well-being. These included feelings such as "at ease" (Teacher, Ardnakinna), "calm" (Teacher, Ballagh), "content" (Principal, Fastnet) and "comfortable" (Parent, Tory).

> To me well-being means I suppose a sense of happiness and contentment and not feeling stresses, well I mean we all feel stressed at times but not feeling unduly stressed or overburdened. And that you've a contented, you've peace of mind and that you've contentment.
>
> Principal, Fastnet

While positive affective states were the most ready and resonant response to the question of "what does well-being mean to you?", there was equally a recognition that feeling happy all the time was not always possible.

> What does well-being mean to me? I don't know. Well-being, it kind of means [. . .] I don't know how to say it. That you don't always have to be happy, but you should be more happy than you are miserable? [Laughs]
>
> Teacher, Broadhaven

Well-being is about being healthy and safe

When asked "what does well-being mean to you?", a number of participants most readily drew on association between well-being and health and safety.

> I mean on quite a basic level because they are obviously junior infants. That they are healthy and that they are well.
>
> Teacher, Ballagh

> So, healthy eating should be part of it which is really hard and is another challenge. You want to follow more healthy eating and providing them with healthy options when they are growing up. It is tricky. Parent, Broadhaven

> You have to make a point to get to bed on time, sleep well, eat well. To be physically happy. Parent, Tory

For one principal, the complexity of needs experienced by many children in their school meant that, for them, well-being began at a basic level.

> We've a number of homeless children for example in the school at the moment. And we find that their nutrition is a real concern for us. If they come to school with no lunch as they often do or if they come with a very nutritionally limited lunch. [A number of children] have had a lot of sickness, a lot of illness, been hospitalised, flus, colds, viruses. So, I suppose we find ourselves talking and thinking about their well-being quite a lot and a lot of that is right back to Maslow's hierarchy of needs. You know, they're not sleeping well, they're not eating well at times and so I think whatever we develop as our maybe view of well-being it has to incorporate all of that.
>
> Principal, Broadhaven

> It's not like fairyland here either, life is tough, [. . .] For some children, life is very tough. Principal, Tory

In addition to sleep, diet and the building blocks of physical health, safety emerged as a key component of the concept of well-being for teachers in particular.

> I think the big thing as well that we like to home in on, especially for infants, is the safety word, because the one thing is that nothing is going to work if we are not safe and healthy in school. So, our two big things are; are we all safe when we are in the classroom and are we all happy? So, before anything . . . before any sounds, before any numbers, we have to be those things.
>
> Teacher, Cashla

> I suppose you're worried about too, as a teacher, the duty of care, especially in infants. [. . .] Like if they bump their head on yard, it's their well-being that's at stake. [. . .] And child protection in terms of that as well if there was ever an issue, obviously we know our DLP [School Designated Liaison Person} and our Deputy DLP.
>
> Teacher, Tuskar

> I suppose to me, well-being would be like their safety, their health. But yeah, a lot would have to do sometimes with checking if cuts and bruises come from home. Now, thankfully here we wouldn't have much, but you never know. You don't know. It can happen anywhere, so you never know.
>
> Teacher, Tory

Well-being is something you "do"

A third conceptualisation of well-being was noted throughout the interview transcripts – that od well-being as something one does. While for some the question "what does well-being mean to you?" drew forth associations between happiness or safety, for many it brought forth a list of well-being programmes or interventions such as "mindfulness" (Principal Tory), "meditation" (Teacher, Ardnakinna), "relaxation" (Parent, Tory), "mindfulness colouring" (Teacher, Tory) or "wellness check-ins" (Parent 1, Cashla).

> Well we have our yoga; we have a mindfulness room and we've a yoga teacher that comes in and does sessions with the children so the teachers can pick it up and then the teachers can do it. And have the programme about head, the SPHE programme deals with bullying issues, mental health, we don't call it mental health with the children, but how to cope with things, how to talk things through, strategies, go to somebody, speak to somebody.
>
> Principal, Poolbeg

> During the year we do yoga. All the classes do yoga for a semester and it's really nice, even junior infants absolutely love it, like taking off their socks on their yoga mats and just taking off their shoes and socks and it's really, really nice. And we do a big well-being week as well with meditation. We do meditation at the end of every lesson I end kind of with a meditation, thinking about nice things, bringing them on a journey, they lie on the ground and they close their eyes, just to kind of calm them down and relax.
>
> Teacher, Ardnakinna

> So, between our emotional check-in and then our calming with our mindfulness, it's kind of the bulk of what we'd been doing at this level.
>
> Teacher, Cashla

> In her [case study child] Montessori they used to do yoga and stuff, she wasn't a big fan of it. Relaxation, she hated "laxation" because it's just lying on the floor apparently. But she does a drop-in yoga class sometimes. Don't you do a bit of yoga [child name]? She's very good at the moves.
>
> Parent, Tory

Well-being was often described, not just in terms of something one does, but also as "tools" that one can use or implement.

> [well-being means] giving them the tools to help themselves, to know what they need and how they can get through whatever it is [they are facing].
>
> Principal, Cashla

> I think giving them the tools from a young age is what is going to help them long-term.
>
> Teacher, Cashla

> That she [5 year old child] can take knock-backs. That they have the tools to cope with that.
>
> Parent, Tory

> [Researcher] What does well-being mean to you?
>
> [Parent 1] Ah the wellness check . . . that check-in is . . . when they say, I said "happy thoughts and I was happy today"
>
> [Parent 2]: Ah that . . . yeah!
>
> [Parent 1]: Like, even to check in cause it's great monitoring tool.
>
> Parents, Cashla

These conceptualisations and their implications for education are discussed in the next section.

Discussion

This study sought to understand how well-being is conceptualised in Irish primary schools by inviting parents, grandparents, teachers and principals to bring forth the meanings, associations, ideas and assumptions that come to their minds in relation to the term well-being. Three discrete conceptualisations were identified: Well-being as happiness or other positive affective states, well-being as health and safety and well-being as something one does.

Th association of well-being and happiness is perhaps unsurprising as these concepts are almost synonymous in our culture. The difficulty, however, is that each concept is as nebulous as the other. German philosopher Immanuel Kant observed that "the concept of happiness is such an indeterminate one that even though everyone wishes to attain happiness, yet he can never say definitely and consistently what it is that he really wishes and wills" (Kant, 1785/1981, p. 27). In spite of the absence of definition and consistency, what is clear and inspiring from the accounts of parents, grandparents, teachers, principals in this study is that they wish and will happiness for their children.

Happiness has long been espoused as the purpose of education, indeed life itself (Noddings, 2003; Aristotle, 2009). Aristotle believed that happiness is achieved through living a virtuous life in accordance with one's unique function or characteristic (Aristotle, 2009). Followers of Bentham consider happiness in more utilitarian terms as the maximisation of pleasure and minimisation of pain (McMahon, 2006). More contemporary efforts to reify happiness centre on people's subjective life satisfaction which is often driven by factors such as career and financial security, physical health and community support (Central Statistics Office, 2022). The challenge for educators is that each of these three (and these are just three of many) conceptualisations of happiness require a different curricular and pedagogical approach. Does one offer a moral or philosophical education with a focus on virtue and acceptance? Or perhaps effective strategies to maximise happiness and minimise suffering? Or does one incite students to be active democratic citizens equipped to advocate for the better working, economic and social conditions synonymous with life satisfaction? Lack of clarity or consensus about what well-being, or indeed happiness, is and how best to "teach" it may inadvertently create a conceptual vacuum. Such a vacuum runs the risk, as Timimi and Timimi (2022) point out in relation to mental health, of being filled with ideology and practices that do little to support and may indeed undermine the well-being of children. This conceptual vulnerability aside, the commitment of parents, grandparents, teachers and principals to the happiness of children abounded from the data.

The second conceptual association was that of well-being as health and safety. Ereaut and Whiting (2008), in their study of use of the term of well-being in the UK Department of Children, Schools and Families, found a high usage of the expression "health and well-

being" in official documents and correspondence. They suggest that this "hitching" (Ereaut and Whiting, 2008, p. 11) of well-being to health reflects a shift or comprise by medicine in recent decades in response to criticism of a purely physical, science-based, model of healthcare.

> The very frequent juxtaposition of "health and wellbeing" seems in practice to stand in for this shift – in context it means the extension of concern with physical health to mental or emotional health, and perhaps "relationships". Ereaut and Whiting (2008, p. 11)

Interestingly, teacher responses revealed a keen attunement to child protection, perhaps reflecting the relatively recent legal onus on schools to monitor and report child protection concerns (Children First Act, Houses of the Oireachtas, 2015). The opportunity afforded by a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, and a question that asked "what does well-being mean to you?" as opposed to "what does the term well-being mean to you?", meant that broader meanings and associations, which may appear faded in the light of everyday consciousness, are encouraged to come forth. But in associating well-being and health, participants did more than highlight the expanding reach of the concept of health, as Ereaut and Whiting suggest. They also revealed the ethical and legal responsibilities they countenance towards the health and safety of children in their care.

In conveying conceptualisations of well-being, indeed any abstract concept, people often draw on associations, examples, metaphors or descriptions of meaning. "I suppose to me well-being would be like their safety, their health" (Teacher, Tory) for example or "to me well-being means a sense of happiness and contentment" (Principal, Fastnet). Perhaps the most unexpected and original conceptualisation of well-being was not expressed in terms of meaning or association but rather in the form of a list of well-being interventions or activities. It is important to note that what is under question here is not the programmes or interventions themselves, but rather the readiness with which the concept of well-being was associated with such interventions. Well-being is a "thing" that one "does". This increased reification and operationalisation (and indeed commercialisation) of well-being in western societies has been traced alongside the burgeoning influence of neoliberal capitalism in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century (Sointu, 2005; Dale and Burrell, 2013). What this study reveals, however, is that this conceptualisation of well-being as a "thing", as a "cultural competency" (Bourdieu, 1986), has spread into the education of our youngest citizens. Dale and Burrell (2013), in charting the rise of what they call the "wellness movement", identified three assumptions on which the idea of well-being as something one does is based: (1) individualism – the assumption an individual can the detached and considered in isolation from their context; (2) moralism – the assumption that an individual's choices and actions can been taken as indicators of whether they are a "good" or "bad" employee, citizen or person and (3) bio-economism – the assumption that a person's well-being can be considered a social and economic resource. The range and readiness with which well-being activities, such as yoga, mindful colouring or wellness check-ins, were proffered by participants in this study suggests that these assumptions of individualism, moralism and bio-economism (well-being as a "tool") have crept into our education system. We seek to be really clear that mindfulness, yoga, wellness check-ins and other well-being activities are not under question or review here in themselves, but rather seek to highlight what this conceptualisation indicates about the relocation of responsibility for well-being onto individuals and away from deep-rooted structural and political inequalities and social determinants of well-being (individualisation). The speed and frequency with which teachers and principals reverted to listing well-being activates when asked what well-being meant to them could be perceived as an indicator of the pressures schools are under to offer

these activities to pupils – to offer a "good" education, to be a "good" school (moralism). And the concern expressed by parents for their child's ability to cope in an increasingly competitive world, and their desire "that they [children] have the tools to cope with that" (Parent, Tory), may offer an indication that well-being is seen as a social and economic resource (bio-economism).

This interpretation of the data might be construed as overly pessimistic but, as many authors highlight, a critical engagement with the concept of well-being and its mechanism of action in the school environment, has been notably absent from the literature on well-being education. While authors have critiqued the concept itself (Craig, 2007, 2009; Ecclestone and Hayes, 2008, 2009a; Watson *et al.*, 2012), what this study adds is indication of the degree to which the idea and assumptions of a neoliberal capitalist conceptualisation of well-being, namely individualism, moralism and bio-economism, have seeped into the primary education system. This is perhaps unsurprising as, as Sointu (2005) first pointed out almost 2 decades ago, the idea of well-being as a "normative obligation" (p. 255) has been creeping into the public conceptual lexicon for many years. Sointu charted this creep by analysing the meanings and use of the term "well-being" in two UK national newspapers from 1985 to 2003. In the 1980s well-being tended to be discussed in terms of the functioning of the state. By the late 1980s well-being had come to be conceptualised in terms of pleasure, comfort and happiness. By the late 1990s, well-being was more self-oriented and with the intimation that one's own well-being was ultimately one's own responsibility – what Lynch (2022) refers to as "self-responsibilitisation" (p. 209). Sointu concluded their study in 2003 by suggesting:

> The "wellbeing practices" that today's choosing consumers turn to can be seen as meaningful because they enable people to reproduce themselves who measure up to prevalent social norms and values. Sointu (2005, p. 272)

As education is a central element in the reproduction of social norms and values (Power and Edwards, 2002; Willis, 2016; McDonald, 1980; Illich, 1971), it is unsurprising that in a society that posits well-being as valuable, educators would seek to offer students every possible resource to reproduce themselves as individuals who measure up to the prevalent norms and values of their society. To "give them the tools from a young age [that are] going to help them long-term" (Teacher, Cashla). The question we need to ask is whether this reproduction of neoliberal capitalist values such as individualisation and "self-responsibilitisation" (Lynch, 2022, p. 209) really is improving the well-being of children? Is it really the purpose of education? Is the conceptualisation of well-being as a moral and economic resource for the individual one we want to espouse in our schooling? And finally, if the concept of well-being, as it is varyingly described by participants in this study, should consume such a large focus in our education curricula?

Limitations

As with all studies, this study had limitations. Chief amongst these was the absence of children's understanding of the nature and meaning of well-being. While we piloted a question, similar to the one that formed the basis of this study, with children, we found that the question somewhat beyond the developmental and conceptual capacity of two cohorts we worked with at the time of the study (Junior infants (age 4–5) and second class (aged 8–9)). Efforts to adapt the question invariably resulted in undermining the "open" nature of the hermeneutic phenomenological study as we, as researchers, would inadvertently give the answer to the question in the very explanation of what we mean by the term "well-being"! The older children, who by their very nature desired to please us as visitors to their classroom, visibly struggled to come up with what they perceived as the

"right" answer to our question. In light of this, and the demands of a research question that required respondents to offer a description of their understanding of an abstract concept, we decided to focus on adult participants in this study. Other methodologies and methods, such as the "draw and write" technique employed by Sixsmith and Nic Gabhainn (2007), have successfully garnered childrens' conceptualisations of well-being and their findings offer a helpful adjunct to this hermeneutic phenomenological, adult oriented, appraisal.

Conclusion

This study identified three main conceptualisations of well-being in Irish primary education settings. The first two, well-being as happiness and well-being and health and safety, indicate the ready association between well-being and its two common binomials – happiness and health. Even within these two conceptualisations of well-being, educators are presented with a range of ethical pedagogical challenges which are explored in this paper. The third conceptualisation, that of well-being as something one does, offers an indication of the creeping influence of neoliberal conceptualisations of well-being into primary education. While this may not be a negative thing in itself it certainly warrants noting, reflection and further critique. This paper concludes by raising important questions about the implications of these varying conceptualisations for the purpose and future of primary education in Ireland.

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